

## Gunnison River Recreation: Advisory Council Briefing

### **“Lower Gunnison River**

The Lower Gunnison River is a quiet meandering stream important to canoeists, rafters, and catfish fishers. Open canyon scenery, scattered with pinon-juniper and cottonwood canopies, give the river traveler much to appreciate. Most scenic is Dominguez Canyon. Its shallow and gentle sloping configuration makes for gentler Class I-II rapids. Small ranches and apple orchards along the shoreline form a pastoral landscape for those seeking serenity and a place to get away from it all.” (*Adventure Traveler website: <http://www.adventurefinder.com/>*)

### Distances:

Confluence Park in Delta to Whitewater – 42 miles

Confluence Park in Delta to Escalante Creek – 14.6 miles

Escalante Creek to Bridgeport – 13.7 miles

Bridgeport to Whitewater – 13.7 miles

### Use patterns:

Use on the Lower Gunnison through the D-E NCA is estimated at 4,000 user days annually. Since only commercial outfitters are required to have a permit to float the river, private use is estimated. The BLM estimates 60% of the use is commercial and 40% is private. Canoeing is the most popular activity along the river, followed by rafting, then kayaking, and finally, jet boating and waterfowl hunting. The BLM estimates the majority (up to 75%) of river users participate in an overnight trip that includes camping along the river. The primary use season is between mid-May and late-September. Generally jet boating occurs during waterfowl hunting season in the fall and early winter. Escalante to Whitewater is the most popular section of the river. As noted above, this is usually a two to three day trip. Escalante to Bridgeport and Bridgeport to Whitewater are popular as day trips. Escalante to Bridgeport is the more popular of the day trips because boaters can access the mouth of Dominguez Canyon. Confluence Park to Escalante is the least used section of the river.

### Issues:

1. Access: The Escalante, Bridgeport and Whitewater access points are all within the Union Pacific right-of-way. The BLM and the railroad have worked cooperatively to address safety and improved access issues at all three locations. That said, there is no formal agreement regarding public access to the river. The access at Confluence Park in Delta is not adjacent to the railroad and is owned by the City of Delta. The access at Whitewater is owned by Mesa County and maintained by the BLM.
2. Crowding/Congestion at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon: As mentioned above, Dominguez Canyon is the most popular attraction along the Lower Gunnison River. Overnight campers prefer camping at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon or on the bench just downstream. The public access bridge across the river attracts hikers and equestrians looking to visit Dominguez Canyon. The access bridge is just downstream of the bench and the mouth of the canyon. As a

result, all hiking and horseback traffic passes through the area where river boaters set up camps. The BLM has received public comment as part of the planning process that the hiking and equestrian traffic has changed the river camping experience. The BLM estimates 7,300 visitors access the mouth of Dominguez Canyon via the pedestrian bridge and 3,000 visitors access the mouth of the canyon via the river.

3. Private property trespass: Again, most river boaters participate in overnight outings. Some visitors camp on private land without permission. The BLM has marked private/public boundaries in places and marked public-land campsites. As a result, there is less of a problem than in the past. If use increases, there will be increased competition for available public-land campsites.
4. Theft and vandalism at Whitewater: Several vehicles have been vandalized and/or broken into while parked at the Whitewater boat launch. Some visitors pay private property owners to park vehicles.
5. Accessing the river with rafts: The Confluence and Escalante boat launches accommodate rafts; however, the Bridgeport and Whitewater launches are difficult to use with rafts.
6. Recreational prospecting: Gold prospectors have used the river around the Rattlesnake Gulch area for prospecting. In 2009, the BLM determined prospecting activities in the area were beyond what are allowed under casual use (see definition below) and were leading to public safety concerns and damage to sensitive resources. The BLM has since posted signage in the area to inform visitors what activities are allowed and not allowed as casual use.

The Omnibus Act withdrew the NCA from entry or location under the mining, mineral leasing and mineral materials laws. Prior to designation, there were no pre-existing claims in the Rattlesnake Gulch area. As a result, any prospecting in the area must fall under BLM guidance regarding casual use mining. Because no claims are or will be held in the NCA, the decision to allow or disallow casual use mining (as well as how casual use mining is to be defined) is up to BLM's discretion. Members of the public have called for the BLM to loosen restrictions on recreational gold prospecting in the area and to work with local prospectors to establish defined rules for use.

Current signage at Rattlesnake Gulch states the following:

Casual use mining includes only those activities that cause **NO** or **NEGLIGIBLE** disturbance to the area, such as gold panning in the river. Any mining activities that go beyond casual use, or that cause a disturbance to the area, will be cited. No mining practices that leave holes in the ground or have a cumulative effect of disturbing the plants or soil in the area are allowed. Any mining activities that go beyond casual use require a **Mining Plan of Operations** (43 CFR 3809.11 [c] 6-7). The BLM will strictly enforce this mining regulation and will cite individuals for violations of safety (43 CFR 8365.1-4[a]) and/or resource damage (43 CFR 8365 1-5[a]2).